DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 651 CS 202 744

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TITLE From Spring to Winter: The How, When and Why of Mythology.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, April 2-4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biblical Literature; *Classical Literature; Course Descriptions; Course Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Fables; Greek Civilization; Greek Literature; *Humanities Instruction; *Mythology

ABSTRACT

Students are graduating from the public school system with little, if any, mythological background. If we are to graduate educated and informed human beings, we must not persist in pursuing our traditional unorganized attempts at teaching mythology. The appreciation of contemporary allusions to mythologies is dependent on a systematized approach. From kindergarten through eighth grade, exposure to Bible stories, fables, and world mythology can establish the proper background. Ninth grade study can include the instruction of Greek mythology through myth graffiti, story-telling, words from the myths, magazine collages and maps, as well as group work and projects. Tenth grade focuses on the comparative mythologies of different cultures. The quest and the hero can be the topic for eleventh grade study and twelfth grade curriculum associates the inherent relationship between myths and modern culture. (KS)

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FROM SPRING TO WINTER: THE HOW, WHEN AND WHY OF MYTHOLOGY

Jim Head

Let's be honest. Students are graduating from our schools with little, if any, mythological background. Consequently, they are unable to handle the richness of mythical allusions, the wealth of literary criticism (Frye's archetypes, Freud's id, ego, superego schema, Grave's poetic theory, to name a few), or the plain joy of reading (and assessing) all the diverse mythological material related to anthropology, sociology, psychology, religion and even mythology itself (Von Daniken, Velikovsky, and Allegro, to name a few).

Why is this? The answer is to be found in our teaching practices and curriculum - we are no longer emphasizing mythology in our schools. Our junior elementary schools have strayed from the story-telling technique ~~of~~ for fairy tales and fables; our senior elementary and junior high schools have played down legend and myth as unsophisticated literary forms - "not relevant enough"; and most of our high schools not only teach mythology just at one grade level (usually grade 9) but also teach it badly. Myths have become short stories and thus have lead to the mechanical learning of long lists of difficult names and have centred on "silly" details of plots. And then we wonder why students neither care for, nor see the significance of, mythology in poetry, novels and plays.

It is no longer a tolerable situation. If we are to graduate educated and informed human beings, we must not persist in pursuing our traditional, unorganized, half-hearted attempts at teaching mythology.

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Let me re-enforce this point. Consider the following from the point of view of the students you teach or the public in general.

A Movie Review

The Long Goodbye is Gawain and the Green Knight, a dense cluster of western man's troubling myths:

For the private eye is an aspect of American myth. Private, as in self-sufficient, uninvolved: Deerslayer and Ahab. Eye as in judge and prophet. Essentially, a Protestant figure: God is personal and can't be contacted by direct dialing. Grails are followed on retainer....

The Long Goodbye is mystery, the debased word. And mystery, the larger word: grace, sacrament, redemption. A first-class film.

(Note the journalistic style - a great opportunity to combine myth and journalism)

Jokes

Do you remeber the Cyclop's jokes in the "Wizard of Id"?

Cyclops to the psychiatrist - "I think I'm in love with the CBS."

or Ophthalmologist to Cyclops - "Hold the card over one eye and read the top line."

and from The New Yorker

A lady riding a horse in the park is accosted by a centaur. Her reply -

"It happens that neither of us is interested."

A Television Review

'Kung Fu and the Cult of the Gentle Hero'

'He walks towards the camera, the rising sun a red ball at his back. He is weary, stumbling with fatigue, barefoot and unkempt. All his wordly

possessions are wrapped in a pack slung across his back along with a shepherd's pipe. He is Odysseus, the Wanderer, the Stranger, the mythic hero of western culture.

..... once you.....accept 'Kung Fu' as a epic romance, full of dragons and sorcerers and other fabulous beasts, it's easy to be seduced by Caine's shy charm and by the contest, not for men's bodies, but for their souls. Like Odysseus, Caine wins not because he's stronger but because he's smarter....." (Maclean's, January 1974)

Graffiti

Niobe was a sob sister
Oedipus was a moma's boy
Ariadne led Theseus on
Apollo was just another disc jockey

Newspaper Satire

'Hidden perils in a charter trip across the river Styx'

(The Toronto Star, February 27, 1973)

'It being the wish of Aeneas that he should see his departed father who lived in the infernal regions on the opposite shore of the river Styx, Aeneas descended into the underworld with the Sibyl as his guide. (Scholarly note: In the Sibyl, Virgil created the first travel agent.)

Soon they came to the shore of the river Styx, where they found Charon, the squalid, old ferryman receiving passengers. (Scholarly note: Charon's role in underworld transit was not unlike the role of the Canadian Air Transport Commission in setting fares, regulations, etc.)".....

(This satire on the International Air Traffic Association was by freelancer Wayne Howell)

Novels

"The contemporary anti-heroine is on a voyage. No longer Penelope, she's not staying home waiting for her man to give her life. She's straining to put herself to use, straining to find love and sex that will not chain or diminish her and she's looking around at the world and wondering what's wrong."....

(Anne Royshe, Literary Guild Article)

To appreciate most of the above, one needs a good mythological background. Our schools are responsible for passing on our cultural heritage and most of them are not doing the job. The time has come for a change - here is one possible plan for curriculum and methodology change.

K - 8

Bible Stories, Fables, and World Mythology

What is wanted here is not moralizing in the narrow sense but a concern for pattern, hidden or underlying truths, and the pure excitement of adventures in the strange, the fantastic, and the wonderful. These stories, should be told and read for their own sake, but the opportunity should never be lost to group them thematically (every culture has creation stories, flood stories, hero stories, and morality tales). Or treat them in an interdisciplinary fashion - the geography of Hercules' journeys (almost any hero, for that matter), the art of the east and west (the primitive and pure child-like art of many cultures is so easy to duplicate), the music of cultures (see the NFB film The Owl and the Lemming for a delightful mix of puppets, original music, and story-telling),

the history and times of famous personalities-most research suggests that Arthur, the Greek heroes, etc., were probably authentic people, but their exploits were put in allegorical or metaphoric frameworks (see Man and Myth for these references). Or view them as metaphors or allegories through film (The Loon's Necklace, Wolves and Wolfmen, and Syrinx are good examples). Student exposure to these stories are crucial and vital to the cultural background, perhaps even psychological well-being. Consider this thought of Michael Hornyansky's from an address he gave to the Children's Librarian section of the Ontario Library Association (May 19, 1965) and also found in the Tamarack Review.

> Our own children are normal young citizens of the 1960's: addicted to television, well informed about Yogi Bear, Hercules, Robin Hood, Fireball XL-5, and so on. And yet, a cause for some surprise, they are also addicted to (even haunted by) the classic fairy stories. Why is this? Why should the old stories have such a grip, in this very different age? And why should their grip be so much stronger than the appeal of much else that has been written for children since, with our times clearly in mind--like Tubby the Tuba, James the Red Train, Madeleine, even Peter Pan?
>
> Don't imagine that our children's interest in the classics is narrow or exclusive. They read, or rather listen to, stories, about machines, zoos, Saturday walks, dolls, magicians, children and pets, without much apparent discrimination; and as I've suggested, they are avid consumers of the Hanna-Barbera products, even including

such bilge as the Flintstones and the Jetsons. But the stories they want to hear last thing at night, and especially the stories they remember well enought to tell us (on the occasions when they decide to switch roles), are Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Snow White, Jack and the Beanstalk, and that crowd: stories full of princes, princesses, giants, wicked witches, wolves, dwarfs, and other persons not normally encountered in modern life.

Why? The short answer, and the abvious one, is not that such stories are 'imaginative, far from reality', and offer the child an escape into dreamland; but quite the contrary, that they do accurately reflect the child's picture of himself and his family. The father is king, mother is queen in this tiny world; and they ought to be wise, kind, and strong. The son, with light upon him from his parents' eyes, is a little prince; and our five-year-old daughter, for one, finds it quite natural to see herself as a princess--in fact she is prepared to look for her Prince Charming in England, because, as everyone knows, princes are scarce on this side of the water.

.....

My way of putting the case is this: the fairy-tales or folk-tales with real grip and staying power are genuine myths (and I trust you are grown-up enough to know that a myth is not an illusion or a lie: even children know better than that---it's a mistake made by foolish adults). A myth is a true story presented symbolically or indirectly instead of literally.

9 - 12

If the proper background has been prepared, students will enjoy the study of mythology at a high school level. The mistake so often made, however, is that it need be done in only one year. What nonense! One does not stop reading Shakespeare once Macbeth has been read; one does not stop studying the short story from once O'Henry, Morley Callaghan, or John Wyndham has been dealt with. So, too, with myth. True, each grade needs to change its approach and material - but that is how it should be. Myth, therefore, becomes a study in its own right - and needs to be treated as such. Consider the following suggestion.

Grade 9 (Greek Mythology)

This is a logical place to start because (a) most students remember something about the Greeks (The Trojan War, Hercules' trials, Zeus' exploits), (b) Greek mythology is the most comprehensive and complete system to work with and as a base, therefore, it allows infinite approaches, (c) it has had the most effect on our culture--indigenous myths make little sense for use as a beginning; Canadian mythology (native peoples) will take another hundred years before it has a significant effect on our culture--our main mythical cultural tradition is Graeco-Roman and Norse.(Roman is essentially Greek borrowings; Norse is quite incomplete;Greek is where to start).

A. Begin with a motivational approach. The object is to tease the student into familiarity with the Greek names that show our cultural heritage.

1. Why are the following given Greek names: Ajax cleanser? Fromethean Fuel? Argonaut football team? etc.

2. Myth graffiti - explain the humour (see p. 24 of Man and Myth).

3. Story-telling - do each of the Olympians in an anecdotal way bringing in slides and art work to help illustrate.

4. Words from the myths (see Issac Asimov's Look Words from the Myths for a very fine and complete treatment).

5. Newspaper and magazine collages (or photo montages) of classical references found in headlines or advertising.

6. Maps-utilize the geography to show environmental influences on the myths - e. g., Persephone had to stay in Hades according to the number of pomegranate seeds she had eaten (in the east this fruit is regarded as love food). In some versions, she had eaten five seeds; in others, seven. A glance at the map and consideration of the climatic conditions will tell you in which area the winter keeps the land more barren; hence the geographical variant of the myth.

B. Group work on the myths - essentially a heuristic approach. Each group is to read as many variations of the same myth as they can: (Build up your library for this - do not forget encyclopedias). They are to make accurate notes and then report to the class their story, the underlying interpretation and, if possible, account for any variations. The class can either make notes or the original notes can be duplicated for them. The teacher must help out here by interviewing before story-telling time and by questioning at the time to make sure that the myth and its implications are covered. The areas of study should follow the pattern suggested below:

a) Conception and creation myths

b) The natural world - "science" myths } Life

c) The moral world - right and wrong illustrated in the myths

d) Myths about death and the after-life

C. Projects done at the end of the unit should enable individuals to explore areas of personal interest. The object is to encourage more reading and investigation in mythology and to identify these activities as enjoyable. (See pp. 218-230 of Man and Myth for the variety of media, art, music and writing that may be utilized for this important area.) Projects also show that mythology is a distinct genre and needs its own special approach.

Grade 10 (Comparative Mythology)

Mythology must be worked at. It is not a genre like the short story or novel with carefully worked out plot and subtle characterization. It is a development from an oral tradition; when the stories were set down in writing, they became relatively fixed and acceptable for reading. Mythology is that comment or story which, in its original form, helps explain what a society values most. In other words, underneath the strata of form and content is a great truth. One of the appeals of mythology comes from the detective work at trying to isolate parts of this profundity (can we ever know the whole truth?). The logical extension of the study, therefore, is to take the four areas of investigation (creation, life (science and morality), death) started in Greek mythology and apply it to world mythology. This comparative study should try to cover at least four cultures, and each area should be done by the same group or individuals each time. The reason is simple - one cannot just read a little and come up with answers;

inevitably, a great deal of reading gets covered. This is important if we want students to have a wealth of patterns and material to draw on in senior grades.

Norse, Canadian Indian (be specific, according to tribe as each tribe has it own culture - Indian is a generic word), Eskimo (once again, differentiate the tribes), and Egyptian would be my preference, but any culture could be done here. The teacher should utilize as much of the grade 9 approach as possible and try to get students to categorize their myths. Motivation should not be as much a problem, but projects should receive higher emphasis.

Grade 11 (The Quest and the Hero)

By the senior grades, students are capable of examining literature, mythology, and the Bible together to see how writers have utilized our cultural past. Conveniently, we may divide the heroic traditions into three mythological areas. (This is arbitrary, of course, as it depends on what mythologies are used.) Perhaps the best example of the hero and his quest can be found in Jason or Theseus for the classical tradition. King Arthur and his knights epitomize the medieval Christian tradition. And the modern James Bond or Superman is a good example of "pop" culture, while modern advertising (the myth of Narcissus - try examining our culture in light of TV advertisements - is this how we really are, or are we as Blake said "they became what they beheld?") and the cult of the anti-hero characterize our modern century. The approach here is not only to examine the stories in some detail - and the synthesis of the approach in grades 9 and 10 does begin here with the literary tradition - but to start the "literary" analysis of the heroic tradition. It may best be seen from the following categories or phases;

1. The birth of the hero
2. Destiny and/or the role of fate
3. The quest and its rules (difficulties)

   Note here, the character of the hero and the object of the quest fits the definition of mythology - that which a culture values most.
4. The success or completion - notice those who are not successful
5. The journey home - pratically a quest in itself
6. The reward - though usually short lived
7. Romantic elements - the plight of the women (e.g., consider Andromeda Penelope, Danae, Ariadne, and Phaedra - how much control did each have over her destiny?)

Grade 12 (The Uses of Mythology)

The number of mythical and Biblical allusions found in our senior literature is limitless; Yeats, Graves, The Romantics are but a few of the poets, alone, that contribute to this tradition. But consider the following mythographers:

the scientist -	Immanual Velikovsky's Worlds in Collision
the popularizer-	Erich Von Daniken's Chariots of the Gods
the psychologists-	Jung, Freud, Fromm - any book
the poet-	Robert Graves' The White Goddess
the literary critic-	Northrop Frye's Fables of Identity
the linguist-	John Allegro's The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross
the anthropologist-	Carlos Casteneda's The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge
the media critic-	Marshall McLuhan's Understanding Media
the "modernizer"-	Joseph Campbell's Myths to Live By

The list goes on and on, but not every mythographers is suited to high school students. All of the above are readable and have proved successful with senior classes.

If the course of study outlined above (or a similar spiral curriculum) is followed, we will not have the problem of graduating mythologically uncultered or illiterate students. From the spring of their school careers until the autumn of their graduation the chance for an interesting study of mythology should be provided. Let us not let them leave our schools, as they now do, in "the winter of their discontent".